

NEWS

Going With the Flow

The next life of Waller Creek

BY ARI PHILLIPS, FRI., JAN. 11, 2013

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To explore Waller Creek and environs is to live intensively in the modern world and at the same time to be aware of how brief an instant modernity has been with us; how brief an instant, indeed, the human presence has been here in any guise to contemplate a very old set of surroundings.



PHOTO COURTESY OF WALLER CREEK CONSERVANCY

— Joseph Jones, *Life on Waller Creek*

In 1982, Joseph Jones published *Life on Waller Creek*, a meditative book about the University of Texas English professor's decades-long love affair with one of Austin's main urban creeks. For years Jones strolled the creek, taking "inventories" in which he described his thoughts and feelings while picking up trash (some of which he made into art objects) and observing the landscape — a practice that led to his appearance in Richard Linklater's 1991 film, *Slacker*. In the film, Jones, who had been one of Link professors, talks about the tragedy of life while meandering down a street that crosses Waller Creek. Twenty years later, much of Austin is hardly recognizable — but the area around Waller Creek remains largely unchanged. Jones died in 1999, after 40 years at UT, teaching Commonwealth Eng He was heavily influenced by American Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Tho and its institutions.

Life on Waller Creek is also a history of the creek, named after Edwin Waller, chosen in 1839 by Texas President Mirabeau Lamar to survey the new Capitol site and begin erecting public buildings. (In 1840, Waller was elected Austin's first mayor.) Shortly after the founding of the Republic of Texas, Lamar had sent a party of four men from Houston to locate a site for the new capital. On April 13, 1839, they reported to the president about the future site of Aus "Waterloo" — a hamlet containing only two families: "The imagination of even the romantic will not be disappointed on viewing the valley of the Colo the fertile and gracefully undulating woodlands and luxuriant prairies at a distance from it. The most skeptical will not doubt its healthiness, and the citizen's bosom must swell with honest pride when, standing in the portico of the capital of this country, he looks

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abroad upon a region worthy only of being the home of the brave and the free."

Waller Creek, in the heart of this majestic valley, is about 7 miles long, and merges from two branches along the northern border of the UT campus. The creek's watershed, just over a mile wide at its maximum, now lies mostly between Lamar Boulevard to the west and I-35 to the east. More than 50 bridges span the creek – warped wood footbridges, hefty limestone edifices, six-lane highways.



The Waller Creek watershed runs from North Austin's Anderson Lane to Lady Bird Lake.

Walking the Creek

At the intersection of Seventh and Sabine streets, steep limestone embankments frame the creek and push up and into the surrounding city. During a late summer visit, the sounds of chirping birds and buzzing insects commingle with blaring radios, sound checks, and passing conversations. Pieces of white bread float in the shallow, moss-hued water, alongside plastic bags, beer cans, and darting mosquito fish. Within sight in either direction recline members of Austin's large homeless community.

Minutes before, I'd made the passage from Austin's Eastside to Downtown, crossing under the traffic-laden I-35 and entering the Red River district, home to music clubs – Stubb's, Beerland, Mo the midday heat, stagehands carted amps from trailer to venue. I descended a flight of stairs and passed through the looking glass into an entirely different ecosystem: the partly subterranean, partly submerged life of Waller Creek.

Hanging vines sloped over water-stained limestone walls, and trash eddied around large stepping stones protruding from the creek's shallow water; graffiti lined the corridors passing under streets in either direction. Heading south along the stone walkway toward Lady Bird Lake, I emerged at Easy Tiger, a bar with Ping-Pong tables abutting the creek; balls floated along the far side of the creek, about a 15-foot drop down a reinforced concrete wall.

At Fourth Street, a wooden fence lined a

construction site, where the extensive tunnel project that will dramatically alter Waller Creek was under way. The tunnel, scheduled to open in 2014, will relieve the creek of its biggest threat (to development) or defense (from development) – its 100-year floodplain. The flood control will allow redevelopment of about 28 acres, or 1.2 million square feet, of Downtown.

Once the project is completed, inlets along the creek will catch stormwater and send it 70 feet underground, through limestone, into a subway-size tunnel. During a storm, water from approximately 85% of the creek's 5.75-square-mile watershed will be diverted into the tunnel, which leads to Lady Bird Lake. In dry periods, lake water recirculated up to Waterloo Park via a pumping system will maintain the otherwise stagnating creek waters, and the appearance and vitality of the creek.

Just south of Third Street is Palm Park, an uninviting patch of grass and pavement between Waller Creek and I-35. An overgrown, abandoned public pool lies dormant within a chain-link fence. Two padded benches, their purple and blue vinyl shimmering in the heat, stand on either side of a lifeguard chair, just above the uncut vegetation. Ivy spilled over the fence long ago, obscuring something spelled out in bright blue fabric patches.

Slowly the words surfaced: Go With The Flow.

A sinewy man on a bike with no tires – wheels, but no tires – suddenly approached. "I've been watching you for a while. I live down here, so I have to know what's going on," he said. His jeans, far too large around the waist, were held up by string, and his soiled T-shirt, featuring a large illustration of Chuck Norris, read "Don't F&%K With Chuck."

The man said he went by "Crisco," and asked me to hold his pocket Bible while he gathered baseball-sized rocks, for hunting what he said were water moccasins. (I later learned that no poisonous snakes inhabit Waller Creek.) He charged a metal railing that separated the park from the creek, throwing rocks



MVVA's winning proposal, which will transform 1.5 miles of the creek, is designed along a romantically named chain of parks: the Lattice, the Grove, the Refuge, and the Confluence.



Download the [Waller Creek Redevelopment Plan](#).
COURTESY OF WALLER CREEK CONSERVANCY

as the railing broke his momentum. "These snakes are really nasty; I've got to keep them scared because otherwise they come up where I live," said Crisco, as he hurled rocks at a brownish-red, four-foot snake. His camp, a dozen yards downriver in the middle of the creek bank, was little more than some clothing and trash bags.

Satisfied after frightening the snake into a half-submerged mess of trash and branches, Crisco retired under a knobby old oak to wait out an afternoon shower. He said he'd been living along Waller Creek for three years and was slowly being pushed south toward Lady Bird Lake by the police.

While the Waller Creek project is itself a giant civic undertaking, it also reflects the classic urban battle between "quality of life" and poor people, including the homeless. Austin has a homeless population of several thousand, many of whom spend time near Waller Creek, due in part to its proximity to Austin's Resource Center for the Homeless and other medical care, job counseling, and legal aid services. "There are a number of organizations at each end of Waller Creek that cause those experiencing homelessness to traverse that pathway," said Richard Troxell, president of House the Homeless, an educational and advocacy group for homeless Austinites.



The point where Waller Creek flows into Lady Bird Lake, future site of the "Lattice."
PHOTO BY JANA BIRCHUM

Troxell estimates that about 1,000 homeless individuals use the creek corridor daily. Lately, he says, the city has been encouraging the police to keep the homeless out of the area, he believes to prepare for coming development. He imagines the future Waller Creek as much like the heavily commercialized San Antonio River Walk – homeless-free. "I think the development is a mixed bag," said Troxell. "It will sweep Austin's homeless out of the Downtown area, but if homeless service providers are smart, they'll be able to parlay the onset of the change to favorably affect the people experiencing homelessness in Austin."

Troxell thinks nonprofits aiding the homeless need to work together and plan ahead to build resources and move their organizations elsewhere; otherwise, the business community will buy them out one at a time. "If they do get bought out, the homeless community will be run over by this wave of new energy that's coming," he said. "A wave that will be very moneyed and very police-secure."

The starkest contrast between the worlds above and below is at the 15th Street bridge, just north of Waterloo Park, currently a staging ground for the main Waller Creek tunnel inlet and pump station. The tall, barbed-wire-strung planks delineating the construction site's border present a jarring juxtaposition with the neighboring Centennial bridge, a semi-permanent homeless camp announced itself with a reappropriated "Sidewalk Closed" sign placed in the middle of the walkway. The Capitol building in the background added another layer to the composition.

The Latest Vision

"Waller Creek is the creek most likely to succeed at the hands of architects and city planners," wrote Joseph Jones. "In March 1980, the Austin City Council approved a contract of nearly two million dollars to improve the creek (with a hike and bike trail, landscaping, walls, tunnels, and the like) through downtown."

Thirty years later, Jones' prediction awaits completion, the only certainty being that \$2 million isn't even close to enough money. Now that the



The creek flows through a walkway at the Hilton Garden Inn on Fifth Street.

tunnel is under way, momentum is growing, most recently with the selection of Michael Van

PHOTO BY JANA BIRCHUM

Valkenburgh Associates and Thomas Phifer & Partners from New York City to redesign the Waller Creek landscape. In October, people packed City Hall to hear the Waller Creek Conserv winners of its highly publicized design competition.

MVVA is best known for leading the recent Brooklyn Bridge Park redesign efforts – an 85-acre sustainable waterfront park that runs 1.3 miles along Brooklyn's East River shoreline. I visited the park this summer and was impressed by the diversity of the project, which includes playgrounds, waterfront promenades, trails, and a restored carousel housed in a distinctive Jean Nouvel pavilion – all tied together through subtle design elements. There are stunning views of the lower Manhattan skyline, including the new One World Trade Center and the Brooklyn Bridge. It's an indicator of what might be accomplished with Waller Creek.

MVVA's winning proposal, which will transform 1.5 miles of the creek, is designed along a romantically named chain of parks: the Lattice, the Grove, the Refuge, and the Confluence. In November, Austin voters authorized \$13 million in bond funding, with another \$17 million promised in the next few years and an ultimate price tag of \$60 million. The Waller Creek Conservancy, a nonprofit formed to support the project, believes it can raise another \$60 million in private donations, for something as dramatic as New York City's High Line, a long, elevated park built on a former section of Manhattan railroad.

"I think there is a good parallel between the projects," said Frederick Steiner, dean of the UT School of Architecture. "One is elevated and the other arguably is sunken. In a way Waller Creek kind of represents the potential of the High Line on one end and the San Antonio River Walk, a more local precedent, on other end." Steiner served on the governance board for the Waller Creek design competition. "There are several really interesting things about the winning entry," Steiner said. "First, it suggests very smart and doable interventions. Second, the string of parks acts to connect a network, but allows each of the individual parks to develop on its own. Third, the attention to the Eastside."



Crisco
PHOTO BY ARI PHILLIPS

Most of what makes Waller Creek such a "wicked" problem (the term used in the jury report recommending the MVVA proposal) is tied into the history of Austin, specifically the historically embedded division of East vs. West. The natural division created by Waller Creek was amplified by the decision in the 1920s to officially racially segregate the city along the corridor, later reinforced by the construction of I-35, an uninviting and dangerous physical barrier. "On top of the historical context, the intermittent flooding kept the area relatively undeveloped," Steiner said. "And the city more or less turned its back on Waller Creek."

The Paradox of Meddling

"We've meddled in Waller Creek since 1839, when we settled on it," said Kevin Anderson, a researcher at Austin Water's Center for Environmental Research. "This is just part of what humans do, for better or worse."

"The paradox of meddling in these places is that the ruinous attractions get replaced by planned attractions," Anderson continued. "The proposal designs are all from well-intentioned people imposing their vision of nature on that creek. The creek itself has a much longer history, of which this is just a moment in time."

For nearly a decade, Anderson has been giving

talks about Joseph Jones and Waller Creek, regularly referring to his thesis, *Marginal Nature: Urban Wastelands and the Geography of Nature*.

"The first time I did a talk on Joseph Jones, his daughter walked into the room," Anderson said, tinkering with a bolo tie that Jones made from an object he found in the creek. "Since then his two daughters have sort of adopted me. In some ways they think of me as a ghost of their father, because of some strange serendipitous connections."

In 1988, while a UT student, Anderson would often wander the creek while waiting for the bus. He regularly bumped into an old man doing the same – only later did he realize the man was Joseph Jones. By then he'd already become a devotee of Jones's writing, viewing him as a compadre who understood the creek's history and ecology. "I think for someone like Joe or myself, part of the appeal of these sorts of places is how they change," Anderson said. "The regret I have is that our cultural attitudes towards nature inhibit so many people from appreciating what's actually there. I really love the ruinous attraction of that creek, in part because I spent so much time on it and I know the snapping turtles and the wood ducks and the green herons."

Anderson sees what's happening along the creek fitting perfectly into the persistent dynamic of cities and urbanization. "I lived in New York City in the 1980s when the High Line really was spectacular, before they ripped it apart and replaced it with what they believe should be there for development. And that's what's going to happen to Waller Creek. If you take the long perspective, 100 years from now, will either be maintained?"

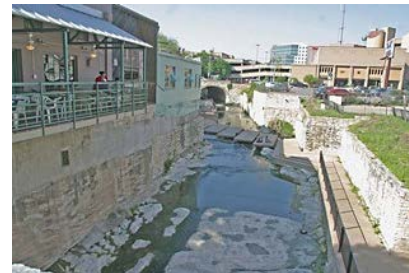
Naturally Unnatural

In the shadow of UT's Darrell K. Royal Texas-Memorial football stadium, I descended into Jones' territory along the creek, at the intersection of 21st and San Jacinto. The foliage was noticeably different here – less tropical, woodsier – and the flanking green space was wider. Circumnavigating the stadium regularly to get to school or work has conditioned me to sigh at its towering presence and feel a kinship with the students who, in the 1969 incident hyperbolically recalled as the "Waller Creek Riot," chained themselves to trees in protest of the stadium expansion and the felling of the trees.

During the annual South by Southwest Eco conference last fall, I'd joined a volunteer event in which participants could pick up trash along the creek, make seed balls for planting, or map invasive species. I spent the next two hours with two Amherst College students and our guide, Jessica Strickland, invasive species program manager for the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center. We documented the exact location of these unwelcome trespassers, information that would later be added to a database to be referenced when it came time to remove the plants. When we weren't straddling limestone outcroppings, we paused intermittently to admire the scenery. Cypress trees rose through streaks of sunlight, and snakelike root webs hosted turtles trying to catch a ray. Young Texas palmettos spread their fronds like green peacock tails. Behind the Alumni Center, the creek had been manicured by university landscapers – a rich mix of shrubs, bushes, and trees, invasive and indigenous alike.



Kevin Anderson
PHOTO BY ARI PHILLIPS



The Boiling Pot patio on Sixth Street overlooks the creek.
PHOTO BY JANA BIRCHUM

We encountered a lot of privet, chinaberries, and other interlopers. While I enjoyed the taxonomic education, I didn't see much hope for an indigenous-species-only Waller Creek, and I wasn't convinced it was really worth the effort. Later I asked Anderson how he felt about the notion of invasive species, and he said he doesn't believe that there's a species-correct biological community for a city, when cities by definition completely alter natural ecology. "The natural history of the city is unnatural," he said. "So when you go down to Waller Creek and say these things shouldn't be here and these things should, what exactly are you saying?"

He thinks the focus should instead be on management of urban ecosystems, for which the concept of invasive species isn't very useful. A better term, he suggests, might be "problem species" – such as giant ragweed, bamboo, or poison ivy, each of which dominates parts of Waller Creek. "This all goes back to America's obsession with the idea that there was wilderness here, and that it was 'right' once," Anderson said. "The first question is, when was that? And the next question is, some of you want to live in the past and try to manage backwards – but how do we go forwards?"

Trash to Treasure

To complete my journey, I needed a boat and a loyal shipmate. Together we entered Lady Bird Lake just west of I-35 and made it about 100 yards up the creek, nearly reaching Palm Park, before turning around because of shallow, stagnant, putrid water. As we pivoted, I spotted a snakeskin hanging from a tree that protruded from the large, stone containment wall. Crisco?

Ducking low branches and pushing off submerged logs, we headed back toward Lady Bird Lake. Two cardinals hopped on some enormous reeds, their bright red feathers matching the kayak; together we stood out from the hearty greens and flat blue-greys surrounding us. A rotten scent hung in the low air. As we passed under a timeworn, three-foot diameter pipeline, I thought about how much sewage might be passing overhead, and then about how much might be just inches beneath us.

There are now two striking aspects at the mouth of the creek: a profusion of birds and a buoyed-off, cofferdam construction site. Cormorants lined the ring of yellow, rectangular barriers floating around the work zone; they took flight, one by one, as we approached. Egrets and great blue herons waded near the riverbank, regal with their long necks and slender heads. The planned outlet facility for the Waller Creek Tunnel, a 50-foot-deep lagoon, will one day quietly inhabit the terrain beneath this part of the lake. The brand new, modern Waller Creek Boathouse nearby is the first indication of the changes to come.

Lady Bird Lake may seem like a slow-moving mass of tranquility as old as time, especially when encountered after paddling through the dilapidated urban gutter that is lower Waller Creek. Yet it too is an artificial, man-made attraction, a dammed stretch of the Colorado River. Called Town Lake until being renamed in 2007, the six-mile lake was created in 1960 with the construction of the Longhorn Dam, to protect against flooding, generate electricity, and establish a reliable water supply. By the 1970s the lake was neglected and overgrown, much like Waller Creek today – but now wide trails, boat docks, highrise hotels and high-end apartments ring its shoreline, with a new boardwalk soon to be built to complete the trail connection between east and west. Probably more than ever, the lake has become the central artery tying Austin's disconnected neighborhoods together. The revitalization of lower Waller Creek will continue this trend of Downtown urbanization, bringing more people and activity.

Julie Holden, Joseph Jones' granddaughter, thinks the change will be a good thing. "I think it's really cool," she said. "I don't mind them turning it into a sort of river walk. I think the River Walk in San Antonio is great." Holden, a real estate agent, lives in Austin with her husband and six-year-old daughter. She believes her grandfather would "strongly approve" of the plan to revitalize the area. "He would be thrilled with people taking an interest in this beautiful natural resource that's the heart of the University of Texas campus," Holden told me. "He probably wouldn't approve of the development Downtown though – the 'River Walk' idea would bother him. But he was a balanced guy, and I expect he would feel that if it made it possible for conservancy to happen, then that would help validate it."

Holden remembers Jones as an inveterate tinkerer and master woodworker, who would utilize many of

the things he found along the creek. "I have a child's rocking chair that he picked up," Holden said. "He repaired it and added cat faces on the side with a tail going up the back. Now all these years later, it's in my daughter's room. I think this whole idea – that one man's trash is another man's treasure – is very important."

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FEB. 8, 2013

KEYWORDS FOR THIS STORY

Waller Creek, Joseph Jones, Richard Linklater, Waterloo Park, development, nature, Edwin Waller, homelessness, Richard Troxell, House the Homeless, Waller Creek Conservancy, East Austin, Red River

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